

KAZAKH MEDIA ON REGIONAL WATER ISSUE

By Olga Artamonova, journalist, Kazakhstan

The amount of articles published by the Kazakh press about water resources distribution issue can hardly be measured in cubic meters, like the water discharged from Kairakum or Toktogul reservoirs. However good quality compensates insufficient quantity.

“Struggle for controlling the new ‘international commodity’ may trigger new conflict and regional wars,” Andrey Grozin, a well-known Russian researcher of Central Asia, wrote in his article ‘Water cooperation’ (contribution for *Respublica Business Review* No.7 of Feb.22, 2001). In his view, water is used in the modern world “as a method to press the neighbors.” The Central Asian countries are no exception in this respect.

Many Kazakh analysts assess the region’s water supply issue as a conflict-generating factor. A research conducted by Central Asian Agency of Political Researches (APR) in April 2001 rates the water resource utilization issue second among the contradictions existing between the Central Asian states. The experts’ view is corroborated by the last year’s water supply situation in southern regions of Kazakhstan, often reported in Kazakh newspapers.

SOCIAL ASPECT

For the first time, the water supply issue became acute in Central Asia in 2000. Until that time no significant irregularity had been observed in water supply from the canal *Dostyk* (Friendship), the main water artery in Central Asia. Kzyl-Orda and Southern Kazakhstan provinces are Kazakhstan’s most

populated - with about 2.5 million people - and mainly agricultural regions. Cultivation of rice, cotton and the crops demanding much water remain the provinces’ budget revenue item. That is why the irrigation water deficit instantly became socially colored against the background of the arid 2000 spring and summer. Journalist K. Obolensky shared his impressions with readers of *Express K* after his travel around the cotton farms: “People look with hope at Kazakhstan’s emissaries to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan... The most important thing for them is that one’s plot does not found itself at the end of the canal” (No.128 of July 22, 2000). The then Vice Premier Daniyal Akhmetov said in the newspapers, proceeding from the 2000 vegetation season outcomes, that the water issue would be addressed in autumn. However, as said A.Gubenko in *Novoye Pokoleniye* (No.17 of April 27, 2001) “water is only remembered pending summer heat.”

WATER HUNGER

One of the first publications of 2001 was an article by M. Adilov ‘South Will Once Again Lack Water’ predicting the coming ‘water hunger’ (in *Respublica Business Review*, No.7 of Feb.22, 2001).

The limited natural gas supplies from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan’s insufficient supplies of coal and fuel made the Kyrgyzstan government decide to increase power production at Toktogul water power station by discharging water from this reservoir, Adilov wrote. Newspaper publications related to Central Asia’s water issue reached their peak in July-August.

MORE INVESTIGATIONS

The July session of the government, that focused on water resources in the southern regions of Kazakhstan, encouraged journalists for more deliberations and investigations. High-ranking officials qualified this issue as being of ‘social and political’ character. The then prime Minister K. Tokayev emphasized that “whereas formerly akims [governors] themselves used to have talks, now the Government has undertaken this issue because it understands its political essence.” Hence two questions have been asked: Is there any hope for farmers?, and (once again) Whose fault is this?

One of the focuses of attention was the trilateral agreement signed by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan on water supply terms and conditions. Under that agreement Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan should supply energy resources (natural gas, coal and fuel) to Kyrgyzstan and buy excessive power generated during vegetation periods. In exchange Kyrgyzstan committed itself to supplying 2.5 bn cubic meters of water to the neigh-

bors' fields. Newspaper pages were filled with figures showing that Kazakhstan had not received 2/5 of the irrigation water amount stipulated in the Agreement (*Respublica Business Review*, No.26 of July 5, 2001). Afterwards, Adilov's February warning was mentioned: Kazakhstan has failed to carry out its obligations.

NEIGHBORS' DEBTS

Debts have become the core topic of most of the articles on water issue in central Asia. The more so as the Premier himself said that "debts must be treated more pragmatically and realistically." In early July the weekly *Panorama* published an alarming forecast that the amount of available water could even decrease in 2002 should Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan fail to carry out their parts of the Agreement. In early August *Panorama's* correspondent A.Goncharov in Chimkent (No.30 of August 10, 2001) highlighted the fact that the water level in Southern Kazakhstan reservoirs was 100 m lower under the level considered as being critical, whilst "water reserves in Toktogul reservoir have exceeded the April level by 4.6 bn cubic meters, thus making up 13.4 bn cubic meters." He made the conclusion that "water is not discharged solely because of under-supply of en-

ergy resources from the side of Kazakhstan." Water resources must become a basis for cooperation in Central Asia, believes A.Gubenko of *Novoye Pokoleniye* newspaper. However this can only happen if the Central Asian states at last realize that water in the current situation is a commodity that one has to pay for.

MUTUAL THREATS

Central Asia's water supply issue has contradictions far deeper than just non-compliance with the Agreement, which rarely appear in the Kazakh print media. It is an open secret that a range of contradictions concerning utilization of irrigation water exists between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan has several times claimed that Uzbekistan takes too much irrigation water. Kazakh journalists have reported about this fact in a somewhat poetic fashion: "there is danger that water will disappear in Uzbek dikes in running southwards" or "this scheme could be effective if the first queuing up for water didn't take too much of the precious resource".

The topic of Kazakh-Uzbek relations regarding water was casually touched upon during the discussion on Koksarai reservoir construction project. As writes A.Alekhova (in *Novoye Pokoleniye*,

No.34 of Aug. 24, 2001), "the decision to build Koksarai reservoir emerged as a counter-regulator for water reserves discharged to Arnasai hollow in wintertime," which is in Uzbekistan. This decision has triggered a chain of events, believes A. Grozin: in reply to Kazakhstan's idea to build own reservoir "Uzbekistan disconnects southern Kazakhstan from natural gas and electricity; in turn Astana cuts telephone communication to Uzbekistan" (*Respublica Business Review* of Feb.22, 2001). Noteworthy, this strict comparison of facts has been done by a Russian researcher. The Kazakh media have just mentioned that Koksarai construction project needs agreement of all countries using the canal.

As for the Kazakh-Kyrgyz water troubles, these have been reflected in an argument in reply to Kyrgyzstan's 'debt claims'. "There is tough stance of the Kazakh transport agencies and natural gas suppliers who blame the neighboring republic of stealing from the gas-main", *Respublica Business Review* has made a verbose remark. I would like to once again quote A.Grozin who has said that "water, geopolitics and separatism are very intimately interlaced" and they, in Central Asia, must remember this.